THE MYTH OF

KALAHANDI

A resource rich region reels under a government- induced drought

Richard Mohapatra

and

Ranjan Panda

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SAHABHAGI VIKASH ABHIYAN

5, Duplex, Sailashree Vihar

Bhubaneswar - 751021, Orissa

Phone - 0674 - 440474/444008

E.mail : svabbsr@hotmail.com

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THE MYTH OF KALAHANDI

A resource rich region reels under a government -induced drought

- Richard Mahapatra and Ranjan Panda

The skeletonised frame of 68-year-old Manglu Bhoi doesn't shiver with chilly spring breeze on a bright February morning, but with the thought that he has to walk for two kilometres to fetch a bucket of water. A resident of India's poorest district, Balangir, he is one of the million people from some 9,000 villages in western Orissa who walk for five to seven kilometres everyday, many returning hopelessly the next day as all major rivers and rivulets have dried up. They scavenge the dry riverbed and wait for water. Wherever there is water, riots break out. And Bhoi has every reason to shiver: monsoon is still four months away.

For over 100 years, the undivided districts of Kalahandi-Balangir-Koraput- popularly known as KBK region comprising nine districts now-have survived drought. The current one is said to be the worst, affecting 90 per cent of the region. But the dark images ironically reflect how an imbecile system is smothering a population of one million into death and turning ecological prosperity into a catastrophe.

Life was easier earlier: forests provided livelihood for six months and agriculture the rest of the year. A few decades ago the entire landscape was green. A web of some 330,000 traditional water harvesting structures helped the Kalahandi region tide over some of its worst famines. It also made the region one of the richest in east India. It produced more rice than any other princely states. Despite the recurring drought, farmers harvested so much rainwater in these structures that there was no water scarcity.

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Rain never failed Kalahaandi. Mismanagement did. like in the past, it still rains heavily, but the rainwater is not harvested. The tanks are still there, but silted up. A slight shortfall in rainfall now triggers a large-scale crop failure. So agriculture is a difficult prospect for survival for more than 50 per cent of the population. "Kalahandi"s poverty is amid plenty," says Shiv Shankar Patnaik, Kalahandi's district Panchayat president.

Orissa is in the midst of one of its worst drought years. The state governments has declared 19 districts drought affected, nine of them in the KBK region. Kalahandi is reliving the 1900 famine, the severest in living memory. Rainfall is deficient by 40 per cent (Balangir and Kalahandi have a deficient of 60 per cent), and the crop loss is 50 per cent and estimated at Rs.642.89 crore. Out of Balangir's 1,784 villages, 1,772 have been declared 100 per cent drought affected. In the KBK districts, the crop loss is up to 80 per cent.

Starvation deaths lurk everywhere: the government has received 61 starvation death cases but has admitted deaths of only 19. To escape hunger, thousands of people are migrating to almost every part of the country. As railway stations in Balangir and Kantabanji in Kalahandi get flooded with people trying to flee., the state chief minister Navin Patnaik says, "No one from western Orissa have left their villages for want of work. "However, the Orissa government's white paper on drought admits large-scale migration from western Orissa. Ironically, villagers migrate in the same trains that also transport rice from their villages. This scene is reminiscent of the 1900 famine when people migrated in thousands: a lone train transported both starving people and rice exported out of Kalahandi by traders. The same train also brought back rotten rice from relief agencies. To check starvation deaths, the government has made *panchayat* leaders accountable for any deaths reported intheir areas. But they have not been given power or any role in the drought relief operation.

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"Strange are the ways of the government ," says Jagdish Pradhan of Sahabhagi Vikash Abhiyan, a Bhubeneswar-based non-governmental organisation (NGO) campaigning for a participatory mode of governance.

Literally, this time the people migrate into oblivion. The country would not count them in its development agenda for the coming decade; the census would miss them in their homes.

PARCHED AMID PLENTY

The story of Kalahandi is, in fact, a story of good resources and bad management. Official records and reports of British travellers reveal that the first drought occurred in1898. Kalahandi's more than 100 years tryst with drought is also a chronicle of the destruction of a sustainable and participatory ecology.

Often referred as the "mass of jungle and hills" by 19th century travellers, Kalahaandi and its surrounding areas have become degraded barren land. In the late 119th century, snow and frost were as common as cactus and sands in the 21st century.

Deforestation and collapse of the traditional tank irrigation have caused desertification of this area. Kalahandi now watches helplessly as all the water flows away, even though it receives more rainfall than Punjab- an average of 1,200 mm.

According to a study by Pachim Orissa Krishijeevi Sangha, a Bhubaneswar-based NGO, going by the rainfall data of 1977-88, Kalahandi got an average of 1,255mm. For seven years during this period, rainfall in Kalahandi was more than the state average, while only for five years it was less. According to the Final Land Revenue Settlement in Kalahandi District conducted between 1946-56, "During the last 20 years (1936-56) there was no failure of crops in Kalahandi except in1938-39,1945-46,1946-47 and partial failure in1947-48. There was, however, sufficient stock to meet the requirement of people."

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Going by the Central Ground Water Board's survey, these districts are almost floating over a sea. In a major portion of Nuapada (Earlier with Kalahandi), even during summer, water was found just below 4-6 metres (m). In Balangir, the water wealth is much more. In 65 per cent of this district, during summer, water is just below 4-6 m from the surface. If water was pumped out from open wells in Balangir, then 5-8 litres water would come out per second, a rate more than that of Punjab.

HOLDING WATER

A village that has kept its date with history

Melchhamunda is an oasis in the parched western Orissa. The village in the Bargarh district is fighting the drought with its 400-year-old pond that still contains water. The village depends on agriculture for survival and is only source of irrigation is the around 10-hectare Kata. A Deepak Bhoi, a resident of the village, says, "It is the Bhataa Handi (rice bowl) of the village".

This tank along with another one downstream irrigates 75 per cent of the village's 323 hectares of agricultural land. Except in11979, the villagers did not witness a severe drought, and this year due to the deficient rainfall one of these structures has dried up.

People believe that the nearby Budha Dangar forest, protected by the neighbouring village, has assured many perennial streams, which in turn not only recharges the groundwater, but also feed the tanks. Interestingly, 40 years ago the village residents built a check dam one of these streams from the forest without any help from the government. This check dam irrigates 80 hectares of land and the remaining water is put in the tank, thus encoring water round the year. This year water from the stream has been supplied to different small traditional tanks for irrigation purposes.

Standing the test of time: the 400-year-old pond in Melchhamunda.

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Rainwater was earlier stored through as extensive network of tank. In the KBK districts, every village has a network of tanks. Given the undulating nature of the landscape, the design of these earthen tanks was appropriate for retaining surface water for use during summer. The agricultural community of Kulthas, who migrated to the area around the later half of the 18th century and early 19th century, were expert tank diggers and brought with them the unique design of tank building. Villagers were directly managing these structures through their own institutions like Jal Sabha (water assembly). " This part had a rich and highly sustainable tank culture that evolved with people's participation," said Sohini Sengupta, who did a research paper on western Orissaa's tank irrigation for Oxfam's India Disaster Report. " Paddy would be cultivated on lowland in the command area of the tank during the kharif season and sugarcane during summer. The tanks were built in many instances with free labour of the tenants under community participation and as regards to the king," she added.

To protect these structures from silting, village had a social system to protect forest in the catchments areas. According to report of the Balangir based NGO Vikalp. which has been working in revival of traditional water harvesting structures, till the 1940s the tradition of community-owned structures continued. According to land records- a survey of 1936 and another of 1990-till late 1950s villages built tanks with community contribution. The *Report on the Famine in the Central Provinces, 1900* says: "Between 1896-97, nearly 323,750 hectares (ha) were irrigated by around 5,000 odd tanks in Kalahandi." In 1899-1900, when the monsoon failed, tanks irrigated area up to 141,640 ha.

Using an elaborate system of Mundas, Katas, Chahalas, Bandhas and Chuas, farmers were able to irrigate about 48 per cent of the cultivated land (see box: Neglected structures). But during the last five or six decades,

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the focus has shifted towards big dams like the Hirakud dam and Rengali hydropower project, while village level small structures were ignored. Now only 10 per cent of the land is irrigated. It is the only place in India where the percentage of irrigated land has gone down.

NEGLECTED STRUCTURES

Simple, yet effective, rainwater harvesting structures provided succour in the face of drought

These systems were evolved keeping in mind the unique topography of the region. Earlier, kings used to give agricultural lands to those maintaining tanks as incentives. Today, most of these structures are in a dilapidated condition, and in some cases have simply vanished.

BANDH : A traditional pond that is usually located in the lower ridges. The water conserved is used for drinking and bathing purposes. Almost every village and town of western Orissa has such ponds.

MUNDA : This semi-circular structure is found on the upper ridge of the village and just above the village's expanse of agricultural fields. It is used. for percolation purposes and to retain the moisture level of the field. Water running away from upper areas enters this structures and the semi-circular embankment stops it from running away. it resembles the Johad and each village has anywhere between five to 10 structures.

KATA A variation of the Munda, It collects water from a larger catchments area. It has embankments on three sides. This is also used for percolation but in case of rainfall failure, the embankment is breached for irrigation purposes. In its and a second crop of pulses using the moisture content.

CHAHALS: Rectangular tanks dug within paddy fields but without any embankments. This water is used when there is insufficient water for irrigation.

SAGAR : A structure measuring around eight hectares and is situated just beneath hills and mountains. It catches rainwater gushing from these hills. This is a community-owned structure and kings used to give incentive for such works.

(Source 'Down To Earth,' March 31, 2001)

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Independence triggered the gradual death of the tanks. "After Independence, the government decided to wrest control of all the water harvesting structures including those that were privately owned. Fearing a takeover, the landlords converted most of these structures into agricultural fields. The process was followed by encroachment of public water bodies by the influential people," observes a survey of done by international NGO Action Aid on Balangir's traditional structures. These tanks were later transferred to the Panchayats in1955. As monetary allocation was primarily for roads and building and the community was kept away, tanks were silted up due to lack of maintenance. " The death of this tradition proved a death kneel for the agrarian society," says S.K. Patnaik of Vikalp, a Kantabanji-based NGO working on the revival of traditional water harvesting structures.

The decline was quick and its impact is already visible. In 1946, Kalahandi's 5,497 traditional structures irrigated 38,684 ha of land. By 1970, it reduced to 8,007 ha- a drop of 80 per cent. It is estimated that now only 4,451 ha are irrigated through tanks. In Kalahandi 4,600 minor irrigation tanks were transferred to the revenue department after Independence. As a result, there are 500 civil cases are pending in the court concerning ownership and sharing of tanks. Some of these cases have been going on for over 50 years.

Similarly in Balangir, tank irrigation came down from 53,315 ha in 1937 to 21,771 ha by 1965-66. "Before Independence, the villagers survived on these tanks. Now despite the irrigation plans, drought persists," says Monoranjan Singh Bariha, the district Panchayat chairperson of Balangir. Despite the addition of 292 minor government irrigation projects by1996, a poverty profile report of action Aid states that the irrigated area is just eight per cent.

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The other factor that led the death of the tank tradition is deforestation. In 1900, the forest cover in Kalahandi was 67 per cent. Now it is a pathetic 13 per cent, even though the forest department controls 48 per cent of the district's areas. The culprits: first the British who sourced timber form Kalahandi for railways and shipmaking, and then successive state governments to earn revenue. In Balangir, the phenomena saw its forest cover coming down from 40 per cent in early 1950s to 20 per cent by the 1960s. Now the district forest cover in terms of canopy is only about three per cent.

With the hills stripped of their green cover, soil erosion has become the single-most concern of this region Deforestation silts up the tanks and takes away the productivity of agricultural fields. Every year in Kalahandi, five to 10 per cent agricultural land is covered by soil from high lands, reveals data from the district's soil conservation department. The soil erosion rate is 48 metric tonnes per ha in Kalahandi and the rate of loss in natural biofertiliser is 50 kilogrammes per hectare. According to a study conducted by the district authority, the district loses Rs. 8,473 crore each year due to loss of natural biofertilisers and Rs.8,000 crore due to soil erosion.

During monsoon in Balangir, river flowing through the district drain 2,832-11,327 cubic metres of rainwater every day in to the Bay of Bengal. "Lack of water harvesting structures allows this huge quantity of rainwater to go waste. Balangir can ill afford this, especially when about 57 per cent and 18 per cent of its total agricultural land upland and middle land, respectively," says a report of the Collective Action for Drought Action Committee (CADAC), a district level forum of NGOs.

The result: without storage, a minor shortfall in rain is causing water scarcity and is leading to drought. Going by the ocurrence of drought it is observed that in the 1960s, the cycle of a major drought was eight to 12 years. Now it is every alternative year.

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POVERTY OF POLICIES

Despite the never-ending drought, the government has not taken any interest in reviving these tanks. Money is not a problem; it's the lack of political will. But there is no doubt that the revival of these tanks would help the region to solve its water scarcity. In a survey of 800 villages by the Bhubaneswar-based Sahabhagi Vikas Aabhiyan (SVA), in Balangir-Kalahandi, it was found that using these small structures and taking up few more such structures, 80 per cent of the areas could be irrigated. And the cost is estimated to be just Rs. 500 crore in 10 years. The Indravati Project, touted to regenerate Kalahandi, was built at a cost of Rs 1,500 crore, but yielded little results.

Since 1970s, the focus of development has been on land and water management through extensive watershed development. The KBK district get at a average Rs.100 crore each year for watershed activities and irrigation through various schemes. The failure of theses schemes is visible and experts say that it is due to absence of people's participation and rampant corruption. Way back in 1966, the Orissa Drought Relief Committee noted that corruption blocked money meant for people. A lax, corrupt bureaucracy adds to their woes.

It seems this realisation has descended on the government, but the old habit of taking the beaten path of bureaucratic implementation is hampering its progress. For example, the recent government decision to dig 1,000 new ponds under the food for work scheme has already people opposing it. The reason: the tanks are not suitable for the topography and the availability of land. The special relief commissioner Hrushikesh Panda feels that small structures don't yield more and so the proposed

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ponds would have to bigger about 10,000 square metres. Most of the Zilla Parishad Presidents of the KBK view it as a wrong step. They feel that the traditional structures should be revived with the same money. Further. to identify suitable land for such structures will be very difficult, they opine. This is the reason why earlier attempts to create new structures failed miserably. Moreover, as the community was never consulted before taking such a step, the maintenance was poor. For example, due to non-availability of land most of these structures are being created on high lands without treating the catchments area. As a result, these get silted reducing their water-holding capacity. "Instead of creating more structures, what the government needs to do is to revive the old structures," says Artabandhu Mishra, a professor with Sambalpur University who has studied the region.

Skewed development agenda haunts the region more than the drought. As crores of rupees are pumped into water conservation, the government diverts the money for populists and unproductive works like building construction. In April, 1998, the then rural development secretary, N.C. Saxena, after making a tour of this region observed, "Despite the obvious importance of improving irrigation in the district, it appears that schemes are not geared at improving the health of ponds and tanks and ground water extraction through pumps or lift irrigation."

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APPENDIX-I

ANNUAL RAINFALL IN KALAHANDI DISTRICT AND ORISSA (IN MM)

Year	Kalahandi	Orissa	Year	Kalahandi	Orissa
1977	1354	1327	1989	1073	1284
1978	1360	1333	1990	2214	1866
1979	1069	951	1991	1570	1466
1980	1354	1322	1992	1490	1344
1981	1148	1480	1993	1554	1422
1982	1117	1492	1994	2045	1700
1983	1118	1660	1995	1580	1588
1984	1396	1018	1996	1945	908
1985	1755	1607	1997	1624	-
1986	1362	1548	1998	1125	-
1987	1049	1040	1999	1210	-
1988	978	1357	2000	1164	-

CROP PATTERN IN KALAHANDI (2000 KHARIF) *

1.	Paddy area	183000 hect.
2.	Non-Paddy Area	210500 hect.
	Total Cultivable Land	**393500 hect**

NON PADDY CROPS (In Hectares)

1.	Pulses	81254
2.	Oil seeds	20168
3.	Vegetables	17334
4.	Fibres	16891
5.	Spices	1826
6.	Sugarcane	2670
7.	Other Crops / Fallow	70357

* *(Source District Administration, Kalahandi)*

(Note : Kalahandi region has still one of the best diversified cropping pattern with practice of Dry land Agriculture and cultivation of Drought Resistant Crop Varieties. Still some people, with ignorance, blame the farmers for growing paddy crops in large area. Paddy cropped area in Kalahandi is already less than 46.5% of the total cropped area).

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BASIC INFORMATION ON THE DISTRICT KALAHANDI AND NUAPADA (CENSUS 2001)

		Kalahandi	Nuapada	Orissa
1.	Total population	1334372	530524	36706920
2.	% to Total Population of Orissa	3.64	1.45	100
3.	% of Urban Population to Total Population	7.51	5.66	14.97
4.	% of Rural Population to total Population	92.49	94.34	85.03
5.	Sex Ratio (Number of Female per 1000 males)	1000	1006	972
6.	Literacy Rate :			
	Persons	46.20	42.29	63.61
	Male	62.88	58.78	75.95
	Female	29.56	26.01	50.97
7.	% of Child Population in Age group 0-6	15.83	15.53	14.11
8.	Density of Population (per Sq. Km.)	168	138	236
9.	Percentage of Tribal Population to Total Population of the District (1991)	28.88	35.95	22.21
10.	Percentage of S.C. Population to Total Population of the District (1991)	17.01	13.09	16.20
11.	Average size of operational Holding (in Hect.) 1990-91	1.94	1.77	1.34
12.	Per capita availability of foodgrain in kg. (1994-95)	245	253	203
13.	% of Forest Area of the District to State Forest Area (1995-96)	6.87	2.0	100

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APPENDIX-III

STATE OF THE POVERTY ALLEVIATION SCHEME IN KALAHANDI DISTRICT

EXTRACT FROM THE REPORT OF THE COMPTROLLER & AUDITOR GENERAL

(REPORT NO. 3 (CIVIL) OF 1999)

Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS), A Centrally sponsored scheme, was being implemented in the State from January 1994 with the objective of providing 100 days gainful employment to the rural poor during lean agricultural season and to created durable and productive community assets.

Implementation of EAS in the State of Orissa was marked by serious and large scale malpractice, doubtful payments and employment to large number of unregistered persons and fictitious persons. Further various irregularities in Muster Rolls and delayed payments raised doubts about genuineness of payments.

Reports of employment sent to Government of India differed significantly from what was reported by DRDAs. The scheme was not monitored at any level. Records in regard to creation of durable assets were not maintained and assets were not physically verified by inspections and, therefore, their creation was doubtful. Serious irregularities noticed in implementation of the scheme call for investigation.

Huge amount of scheme funds remained unspent during 1993-98. State Government delayed releasing their share by 11 to 154 days.

(Paragraph 3.3.5.1)

Against the norm of employment of 100 days per person per year only 5.88 to 45.77 mandays were generated in Jharsuguda and Phulbani districts. In Kalahandi district employment generation was less than 10 days per person per year.

{Paragraph 3.3.6 (b)}

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Large number of family cards were not distributed by BDOs. Line departments were issued with cards though they were not the designated authority for issue of cards. Proper account of cards was not furnished in Kalahandi district.

{Paragraph 3.3.6 (c) (ii)}

Rs. 28.91 lakh were paid to labourers after a delay of 1 month to 1 year by ASCO and Horticulturist, Bhawanipatna. The payment was not made in the presence of Sarpanch and was, therefore, doubtful.

{Paragraph 3.3.6 (e)}

In disregard of norms, DRDAs, Kalahandi and Mayurbhanj released Rs. 4.12 crore in excess for Ber and mixed fruit plantations in private land

{Paragraph 3.3.8.1)}

In Bhawanipatna, plantation raised in private land at a cost of Rs. 14 lakh was not found in existence during physical verification.

(Paragraph 3.3.8.6)

(Note : Various studies show that at the time of independence people in this region were atleast getting more than 268 days of work in a year. Because of the faulty development models taken up by Government, during past several years unemployment has become acute all over Orissa and there is exodus of agricultural workers from Rural areas to the cities in search of work. It governemnt is unable to keep it's promise of providing even 100 days of work to the Agricultural workers and in district like Kalahandi if only 10 day's of work is provided, that too as per the government records, can you put the blame on the 'Drought' for the prevailing poverty of Kalahandi ?)

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APPENDIX-IV

OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIES OF L.T.A.P.

(Abstract from the L.T.A.P. document as submitted by the state government during August - 1995)

11.1 One of the major objectives of the Long Term Action Plan made for the districts of Kalahandi, Koraput and Bolangir for the year 1993-94 to 1997-98 was to provide 200 days annual employment to all those willing to work. The concern for employment generation was then natural because the plan was formulated during a drought year. The present strategy is to provide 100 days employment to 6,40,000 no. of people during the lean season of winter and summer. Out of this 3,55,000 people would be provided with employment for another 100 days during the monsoon because they are the poorest of the poor and would not get employment in agriculture throughout the monsoon.

11.2 Since the objective is to saturate the area with development measures fully for these 7 years, there is no calculation of man days to be generated revised in the present Long Term Action Plan. The other two objectives, namely ; i. Prevention of land degradation by arresting soil and moisture runoff and ii. Increasing the productivity of land remain in tact. Two additional objectives of the present Long Term Action Plan are as follows :-

iii. Adequate emphasis on items of critical infrastructure like communication, irrigation, health & sanitation, and education credit etc., So that funds utilized for employment assurance and wage employment would create durable productive assets which would ensure sustainable development and

iv. Ensuring full scale participation of the people in the development process so that they emerge as self-respecting citizens and not as dole seekers with employment or gratuitous relief cards...

11.3 The strategy, as before, would remain integrated watershed management, but the gaps regarding Veterinary and Animal Husbandry sector and in other allied sectors agriculture like oilseeds have been taken care of.

11.4 Organization of users to make them willing and active participants in the development process leading to ultimate ownership and maintenance of community assets and the grass root delivery system would be the major strategy change in the revised plan. This would mean and upgradation in the media and communication network.

11.5 Another strategy would be to associate women in all spheres of development and welfare administration by suitably empowering them to participate in the decision making process in local self government bodies as well as in the participants groups.

11.6 In order to effectively operate the above two strategies, there would be massive collaborative partnership with N.G.Os in the rural development process which would be called the major plank in the strategy of the revised action plan.

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APPENDIX-V

CONSOLIDATED BUDGET OF THE L.T.A.P.

(As submitted to the central Government during August 1995)

(Rs. in Crore)

Sl. No.	Name of the District.	PROFORMA-I Require ment	Availa-billty.	Gap	PROFORMA-II Require ment	Availa-billty.	Gap	TOTAL PROFORMA I & II Require ment	Availa-billty.	Gap
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1.	Koraput	283.40	268.51	14.89	868.40	166.52	701.88	1151.80	435.03	716.77
2.	Rayagada	280.90	186.51	94.39	576.39	127.02	449.37	857.29	313.53	543.76
3.	Nowarangpur	329.04	175.92	153.12	564.63	122.03	442.60	893.67	297.95	595.72
4.	Malkangiri	145.78	130.91	14.87	424.41	96.55	327.86	570.19	227.46	342.73
5.	Kalahandi	376.51	216.20	160.31	681.58	126.08	555.50	1058.09	342.28	715.81
6.	Nawapada	190.36	120.13	70.23	347.87	56.11	291.76	538.23	176.24	361.99
7.	Bolangir	343.12	153.02	190.10	733.95	109.21	624.74	1077.07	262.23	814.84
8.	Sonepur	71.70	23.85	47.85	293.00	40.06	252.94	364.70	63.91	300.79
TOTAL		2020.81	1275.05	745.76	4635.63	843.58	3792.05	6656.44	2118.63	4537.81*

Taking into consideration, all the Sectors to be covered under the LTAP as has been indicated in the Performa I & II, the total requirement of funds under the revised LTAP comes to Rs. 6656.44 crore for these eight districts of Orissa for 7 years i.e. from 1995-96, 2001-2002. Out of this Rs. 2118.63 crore has been estimated to be available leaving a balance of Rs. 4537.81 crore as gap to be met by Govt. of India.

* *This figure has been quoted by some people as 4557.03 in media and in few meetings. (J. Pradhan)*

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About Sahabhagi Vikash Abhiyan :

Sahabhagi Vikash Abhiyan (S.V.A) is a collective of several Community Based Organisations and individuals dedicated to fighting poverty and injustice and to work for a more human world through the process of sustainable development efforts. Sahabhagi Vikash Abhiyan works in collaboration with local Community Groups, like minded Voluntary Organisations working at regional and international level, Concerned Individuals as well as Government and Non Government organisations to achieve greater impact towards attaining it's objectives.

Sahabhagi Vikash Abhiyan promotes the development activities through action research, educational activities and provide support services to social workers and voluntary organisations in Orissa.

CONTACT ADDRESS :

STATE LEVEL CO-ORDINATION OFFICE :

5-Duplex, Sailashree Vihar
Bhubaneswar-751021, Orissa, India
Phone: +91-674-444008,
Fax-Phone : +91-674-440474
E.mail: jagadishpradhan@hotmail.com / svabbsr@hotmail.com

REGIONAL OFFICES :

(I) **For the District Nuapada :**
At-Bilenjore
Po-Konabira-766106
Dist-Nuapada, Orissa
Phone/Fax-06679-44671
E.mail: svabilenjore@hotmail.com

(II) **For the District Bargarh :**
At/Po-Padampur
Dist-Bargarh, Orissa
Phone/Fax-06683-23153
E.mail: svapadampur@hotmail.com

(III) **For the District Kalahandi :**
At./Po. - Paramanandapur
Via. - Bhawanipatna - 766001
Dist. Kalahandi
Phone /Fax. 06670 - 32039
E. mail : svakld@hotmail.com

(IV) **For the District Bolangir :**
Sahabhagi Niwas
Jail Line Para, P.O. Patnagarh,
Dist. Bolangir - 767025
Phone - 06658 - 22940
E.mail : svablr@hotmail.com

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